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TAGS: PHUM PREL PGOV ASEC NI

SUBJECT: HUMAN RIGHTS WATCH BRIEFS AMBASSADOR ON MEETING
WITH PRESIDENT OBASANJO

REF: A. ABUJA 1041

- 1B. ABUJA 971 AND PREVIOUS
- 1C. 03 ABUJA 1034 AND PREVIOUS
- 1D. ABUJA 1158

Classified By: AMBASSADOR JOHN CAMPBELL FOR REASONS 1.5 (B) AND (D)

11. (U) Summary: Human Rights Watch (HRW) representatives briefed the Ambassador about a meeting with President Obasanjo and various ministers. They said Obasanjo did not engage HRW on the GON's inadequate response to violence in Nigeria, and refused to budge on the issue of Charles Taylor's extradition. End Summary.

12. (U) On the morning of June 29, the Ambassador met with Kenneth Roth, the New York-based Executive Director of HRW, and Carina Tertsakian, HRW's London-based Nigeria Researcher. Also present were Acting POL Section Head and Poloff (note-taker). HRW briefed the Ambassador on a June 28 early-morning meeting with President Obasanjo and about 10 others, whom HRW described as ministers.

13. (U) At the June 28 meeting, HRW said they stressed to Obasanjo the need for GON progress in responding to violence in Nigeria: election-related violence, communal violence (reftels A and B), and violence committed by the security forces. HRW cited examples of impunity, delays in deploying security forces, and heavy-handed responses by security forces. According to HRW, Obasanjo declined to engage on the topic. Regarding the Benue State massacre at Zaki Biam by security forces in 2001, Obasanjo asked, "What do you expect if 19 soldiers are killed?" He also said that military forces are trained to kill, and were simply carrying out their training. When HRW pressed the issue of the Benue massacre, Obasanjo and the ministers "shut down" and impatiently urged HRW to "move on" and "stop going on" about it.

14. (SBU) HRW reported that the meeting became "testy" at various times, particularly when Chief Kanu Agabi, Special Advisor to the President for Ethics and Good Governance, demanded that debt relief be considered a human rights issue. HRW characterized Agabi as a "disaster".

15. (SBU) HRW asked Obasanjo about a Commission of Inquiry regarding Zaki Biam. Obasanjo replied that a white paper is available. HRW had no knowledge of the white paper. See Embassy comment below.

16. (U) HRW also discussed foreign policy issues with Obasanjo, who was noncommittal on the Darfur situation.

17. (U) Obasanjo repeated to HRW that he would turn over Charles Taylor only at the request of a democratically elected Liberian government. HRW argued that Taylor has a destabilizing effect on West Africa. Otherwise, as with violence in Nigeria, HRW indicated that Obasanjo would not engage.

18. (U) The Ambassador invited HRW to visit again at the conclusion of their visit to Nigeria and made a tentative appointment for July 13.

Comment

19. (C) Although the "others" attending the meeting were probably a mix of ministers and special advisors, not just ministers, it is noteworthy that Obasanjo gave HRW a full hour of his time with himself and these high-level staffers. Obasanjo was likely repaying a favor: during his imprisonment from 1995-1998 for "coup plotting" against Abacha, HRW worked with the National Democratic Coalition (NADECO), a broad-based coalition of Nigerian NGOs, continually calling for Obasanjo's release from prison.

110. (C) The white paper on the Benue State massacre was given by President Obasanjo to former Ambassador Jeter on June 11, 2003 (reftel C), but was never released publicly, to the Embassy's knowledge.

111. (C) Obasanjo's refusal to engage on the Benue massacre

or on Charles Taylor has been consistent. For now, the GON is not likely to take action on the Benue massacre. On the Taylor issue, Obasanjo is probably keeping an eye on public opinion. If important Nigerians begin to call for Taylor's extradition, Obasanjo may find a way to evict Taylor at the "request" of either Liberia or Sierra Leone. But, for now, he appears resistant to pressure from outside Nigeria on the Taylor issue.

CAMPBELL